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ABSTRACT

Data on teacher absenteeism in the U.S. as a whole as well as in specific states and districts indicate that the problem is serious and growing. A review of research findings on more than 15 factors affecting teacher absenteeism shows that time of year, levels of faculty agreement and community support, teacher interdependence, and requirements for personal reporting of absences to supervisors have strong impacts on absenteeism. Researchers have also identified six major costs of teacher absenteeism, including increased financial expenses, instructional costs (because substitutes are less effective), loss of management time, organizational costs, lost time for student programs, and loss of credibility with the public. Three general solutions are recommended: documenting the extent of the problem, making absenteeism an important issue, and involving teachers' immediate supervisors in approving absences. Another 20 recommendations are also listed. Examples from six districts in five states illustrate ways to use paraprofessionals instead of substitutes, to handle sick leave accumulation, and to reward good attendance. (RW)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Update on Teacher Absenteeism

". . .a sort of custom has arisen under which many employees take those (sick) days whether they are ill or not."[1]

This statement made in 1976 about teacher absenteeism may provide a more accurate picture of the problem today than it did then. To some, the increase in teacher absenteeism may suggest a serious national decline in the health of school employees, but no one really thinks that this is the case. The "absence problem" is a continuing concern for everyone involved with education. It infiltrates the life of the entire school. It not only creates frustrations for the principal, but affects student learning and parental attitudes.

The Current Situation

Differences in definition of what constitutes absence from work and categories used to report information about the national labor force[2] make

1. "Sick on Sick Pay," Gary, (Ind.) Post-Tribune, February 13, 1976, p.A4.

2. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics uses "Education" to include all employees in public and private education, only 47 percent of whom are teachers. The National Center for Health Statistics works with "work-loss" days. Several different formulas are also used to indicate amount of work loss attributed to absence.

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it impossible to readily compare absence rates of teachers with those in other labor sectors. The national data, however, depict trends that raise serious concern even when one keeps in mind the differing criteria applied.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example, reported that from 1967-1974 the increasing rate of absenteeism in the category designated "education" was double the rate of increase for the classification, "total U.S. industry."[3] The Bureau of National Affairs publishes quarterly data on all employment job absences which indicated a 27.5 percent decrease in absences during 1973-1978. The National Center for Health Statistics studied work-loss days for currently employed persons during the period 1965-1975 and reported the average number of scheduled work days lost during this period declined by 10.3 percent.

On the other hand, studies of teacher absenteeism seem to indicate an opposite trend. A report to the Illinois Department of Education documented that, from 1971-1976, teacher absences in Illinois increased by 16.1 percent. A major investigation of teacher absences in 135 Pennsylvania school systems during the 1977-1978 school year found that the "average" teacher was absent 8.2 days, a 46 percent increase over earlier data. The Pennsylvania report also found that the educational absence rates were significantly higher than all major industry classifications and almost double that of the professional and technical absence rate for private industries. Other studies in New Jersey, Dade County, Florida, New York, Nevada, Indiana, and California revealed similar increases in teacher absenteeism.

The most comprehensive research in this area was compiled by the Educational Research Service of Arlington, Virginia. A 1981 ERS study, National Survey on Staff Absenteeism, reported data collected on the absentee problem during 1978-1979 from 470 school systems. Because of differences in research design and in data cited, direct comparisons cannot be made, but some of the systemwide findings do indicate the scope of the problem as well as some of the emerging characteristics:

- The average number of days absent per teacher for all paid absences in all reporting school systems was 8.0 days: This reflected an average of 9.0 days for large systems (25,000 or more pupils), 8.4 days for medium systems (10,000 to 24,999 pupils), 8.0 days for small systems (2,500 to 9,999 pupils), and 6.5 days for very small systems (300 to 2,499 pupils).

- The average number of days absent per teacher by type of community served was 8.9 days in urban areas; 8.5 days in suburban areas, 6.7 days in small towns, and 6.5 in rural areas.

- The average number of days absent per teacher by average teacher salary was 9.2 days in systems averaging $17,000 or more; 7.8 days in systems of $15,000 to $16,999; 8.0 days in systems of $13,000 to $14,999; and 6.8 days in systems of less than $13,000.

- The average number of days absent per teacher by method of absence reporting was 9.1 days in systems using a telephone answering service, and 7.6 days when a specific person is contacted.

3. J.N. Hedges, "Unscheduled Absence from Work -- An Update," Monthly Labor Review, August 1975, pp. 36-39.

- The average number of days absent per teacher by negotiating status of school system was 8.2 days in systems that negotiate with teachers, and 7.2 days in systems that do not negotiate with teachers.

- The average number of days absent per teacher by personal leave provisions was 7.9 days in systems that provide 3 days or less of personal leave, and 8.8 days in systems that provide more than 3 days of personal leave.

- The teacher absence rates for all paid absences in all reporting school systems by type of community served was 4.7 percent in urban areas, 4.6 percent in suburban areas, 3.6 percent in small towns, and 3.5 percent in rural areas.

- Teacher absenteeism was viewed as a high or very high management concern in 64.9 percent of school systems with 25,000 or more pupils, 45.4 percent in systems with 10,000 to 24,999 pupils, 38.6 percent in systems with 2,500 to 9,999 pupils, and 33.0 percent in systems with 300 to 2,499 pupils.

These studies establish that teacher absenteeism is not only continuing but increasing. Authorities in the general field of employee absenteeism suggest that the level of total absences should not exceed three percent of the available work time, and that the "attainable minimum" level can approach two percent or less.[4] The national teacher absence survey data above show that reported minimums were above three percent regardless of district size or location. Many of the rates were double the attainable minimum.

Characteristics of the Problem

A complex problem like mounting absenteeism cries for solution. But we must begin with what is known in order to find clues to causes and possible solutions. Here are some general descriptive findings about teacher absences:

1. Paid sick leave is the widest held fringe benefit in the country.

2. The rate of teacher absence increases from September until May.[5] (The Pennsylvania School Boards study found the September rate was 2.6 percent; the May rate, 4.78 percent.)

3. The highest rate of absenteeism occurs on Monday and Friday.

4. Absenteeism has continued to increase since the passage of collective bargaining legislation despite better pay, smaller classes, and more appropriate assignments.

5. Demographic factors including salary and marital status do not have a significant impact on amounts of absenteeism.

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4. Frederick J. Gaudet, Solving the Problem of Employee Absence. A.M.A. Research Study 57. New York, N.Y.: American Management Association, 1963.

5. Teacher Absenteeism, American Association of School Personnel Administrators, Seven Hills, Ohio, 1980.

6. High levels of absenteeism occur in school districts where there are low levels of faculty agreement about the goals and policies of the community and district (even when the material incentives are high and physical conditions are pleasant).

7. Districts with high levels of community support and policy agreement have low levels of absenteeism regardless of lower material rewards and less pleasant physical conditions.[6]

8. Elementary teachers have higher rates of absence than secondary teachers.

9. Absenteeism is reduced when there are smaller sub-units within the school and the teachers in those units are interdependent.

10. Lower levels of teacher absence are associated with reporting procedures that require the teacher to speak directly with the immediate supervisor.

11. There is some evidence that teachers in Title I or inner city schools and those who teach disadvantaged and minority children have higher absence rates.

12. The older the employee, the higher the rate of absence for sickness. For total or uncertified absences, younger employees have the higher rates.

13. Females and minorities appear to have higher absence rates, but when other variables are factored out, the differences are less clear.

14. Marital status, family size, level of education, and amount of experience are not consistently related to absence.

15. Employees with higher level jobs tend to be absent less often than those with lower level jobs.

The Costs of the Problem

The cost to schools and school systems arising from teacher absenteeism is astounding. After a national survey of selected principals in 1978, Manlove and Elliott found six major costs associated with the problem: (1) Instructional costs, (2) Financial costs, (3) Management costs, (4) Program costs, (5) Organizational costs, and (6) Credibility costs.[7] As absences increase, each of those costs increases. In Instruction and Finance, the real costs and our understanding of their impact on the schools are dramatic.

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6. Teacher Motivation, Research Action Brief Number 19, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oregon, October 1980.

7. Peggy G. Elliott, "Where Are the Students and Teachers? Student and Teacher Absenteeism in Secondary Schools," Viewpoints, Vol. 55, No. 2, Spring 1979.

■ FINANCIAL COSTS

Because of the way that the labor segment for education is defined, Bureau of Labor Statistics figures do not exist for the total dollar cost of teacher absenteeism in elementary and secondary schools. An estimate of the costs, however, can be derived from research at Stanford University. According to this 1977-1978 study, the loss of time from teacher absence in the elementary and secondary schools alone cost more than one-half billion dollars for substitutes and $120 million in fringe benefits that teachers receive whether or not they are in their classrooms.[8] These numbers are even more alarming when we consider that from 1977-1979 the median minimum daily pay for substitutes increased by 13 percent and the median maximum rates by 8.6 percent.

In the 1978-1979 ERS study of the costs of employee absenteeism in 470 schools, the following dollar amounts and averages were reported:

- The mean cost of substitute teachers during school year 1978-1979 in all reporting systems: per pupil, $14.39; per teacher, $260; per pupil-day, $1,908; as a percent of total teacher salaries, 1.7 percent.

- The mean cost of absent teachers' salaries during school year 1978-1979 in all reporting systems: per pupil, $37.53; per teacher, $671; per pupil-day, $4,383; as a percent of total teacher salaries, 4.3 percent.

Yearly dollar amounts are also known for some states. In Illinois, the 1975-1976 cost was in excess of $31 million. Pennsylvania reported spending approximately $27 million annually for substitutes to fill the short term absences of teachers, and $88 million in total personnel costs associated with teacher absences. Tulsa, Oklahoma spent $3,000 per day for substitute teachers in 1977-1978. An Ohio study reported the cost of teacher absences in 1979 was equal to the entire amount of funds spent that year for the purchase of educational equipment.

While these dollar costs are presented in such different ways that making direct comparisons is difficult, their import is not difficult to understand. Far too much of the meager financial resources available to schools is being spent to subsidize teachers absent from their classrooms.

■ INSTRUCTIONAL COSTS

The instructional model in American schools is predicated on the interaction of students with a teacher. When the teacher is absent, generally no "alternative model" is available. The teacher must be replaced by a substitute. Conventional wisdom and research alike indicate that, with substitutes in the classroom, the regular instructional program tends to falter. One study

8. Edwin M. Bridges, "Job Satisfaction and Teacher Absenteeism," Educational Administration Quarterly, Vol. 15, No. 2, Spring 1980, pp. 41, 55.

showed that substitutes were significantly less effective in instruction than student teachers.[9] The loss of instructional time is the most serious of all the problems associated with teacher absence. Wiley and Harnischfeger report:

> In terms of typical gains in achievement over a year's period we concluded that in schools where students receive 24 percent more schooling, they will increase their average gain in reading comprehension by two-thirds and their gain in mathematics and verbal skills by more than one-third. These tremendous effects indicate that the amount of schooling a child receives is a highly relevant factor in his achievement.[10]

A comprehensive report, published in 1980 by the National Institute for Education, makes a strong case for a connection between time and academic progress. Real academic results are related to the time students are effectively engaged in instruction, a situation rarely the case when substitutes are in the classroom.[11] This concept of effectiveness is based on the work of Benjamin Bloom at the University of Chicago and the research of the Far West Laboratory in San Francisco.

If the findings about the ineffectiveness of substitutes and the link between real instructional time and student achievement continue to be validated, teacher absenteeism will have to be examined as a critical variable in the decline of student progress. The "insufficient instructor" has always been subject to dismissal in that he or she was not facilitating student progress. One wonders if the "insufficient attender" might not belong in the same category.

■ OTHER COSTS

While the instructional and financial implications of absenteeism are certainly the obvious ones, some other costs need to be reviewed.

> Management Costs: Building administrators must handle an increasing number of details related to teacher absence. In addition to the routine accounting and clerical tasks involved, some principals are even asked to observe each substitute every day. This activity takes valuable time away from the more central tasks of the building leader.

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9. New York State Office of Education and Performance Review. Teacher Absenteeism in New York City and the Cost Effectiveness of Substitute Teachers, Albany, NY, State Department of Education, January 1974.

10. D. E. Wiley, and A. Harnischfeger, "Explosion of a Myth: Quantity of Schooling and Exposure to Instruction, Major Educational Vehicles," Educational Researcher, April 1974, pp. 7-12.

11. Carolyn Denham, and Ann Lieberman, eds., Time to Learn, National Institute of Education, May 1980.

- Organizational Costs: When members of committees, councils, study groups, etc., are absent, these activities must be delayed or continued in less productive fashion. The original intent of involving faculty in the planning and implementation processes is thwarted.

- Program Costs: Student activities sponsored by teachers do not happen when the teacher-moderator is absent. For some students, the loss of these informal learning opportunities is as serious as the loss of formal class time.

- Credibility Costs: Public knowledge about greater absences on Mondays, Fridays, before holidays, and at the end of the school year is costing teachers and the schools serious credibility with parents and the community at large. A teacher's own poor attendance also destroys credibility with students in his/her classes.

Some Promising Solutions to the Problem

Certainly the seriousness of the teacher absence problem has been adequately documented. The magnitude of its many costs demands that solutions be found. Since the problem arises from many sources, it is unlikely that it can be resolved by any single solution. The literature outlines a variety of approaches, and principals from various parts of the country willingly supply others. The effective approaches suggest a number of common characteristics.

1. Document the extent of the problem, citing the instructional time that may have been lost and the dollars that absences are costing.

   Unless teachers perceive that absenteeism is a serious problem and getting worse, the issue is simply too general to provoke much concern. Ordinarily, most people do not think of themselves as a problem or even a contributor to it. Presenting the actual costs and the percentages of those costs both schoolwide and by departments makes the issue more difficult to avoid.

   Once the costs, percentages, etc. have been established, they need to be kept up-to-date and prominently displayed. This step is particularly important because buried facts are not reaching those whose behavior needs to be changed. Some districts report that they equate the dollars spent on absences with what could have been spent in other areas. The total dollars spent because of absence in year X, for example, would have paid for two percent additional instructional materials, or 40 teacher aides, etc. When this kind of information is available, teachers take notice.

2. Make it well known that the absence issue is important.

   If no one seems to care very much whether teachers make good attendance a priority, some will not. If no one stresses that sick days are health insurance and not paid leave, some will view them as leave.

The attendance record should be part of every teacher's evaluation, and the ways in which attendance affects student achievement made very clear on every occasion that opportunity presents itself. The message must be directed to the teaching staff. Personal notes of praise, certificates of appreciation, cash awards, gifts, etc., have all been used to positively reinforce good attenders. Some negative reinforcers that work are administrative letters of concern placed in the personnel file, telephone calls and visits from the supervisor to verify the legitimacy of an absence, and required statements from a physician for every absence (even one day) for backsliders.

Some districts report working through the teacher's organization. Teacher officials know how important public support is to their cause. They know that poor attendance records dampen support and credibility for their members. They usually know about the costs. When teacher organizations are involved in determining the use of the savings from reduced absenteeism, they are more likely to assist in eliminating the problem.

3. Involve the immediate supervisor.

If only one approach to the absence problem were possible, involving the immediate supervisor would be the choice. The usual arrangement for reporting absences in most schools has been to speak to the principal's secretary or to a central switchboard person. In districts where this was changed so that the teacher was required to speak directly to the immediate supervisor, the absence rate dropped significantly. Every district that reported using this practice found it to be effective. In some of the districts, the drop was dramatic.

One of the less obvious reasons for the success of this strategy is that the supervisor has the authority to make exceptions and could sometimes suggest an alternative to a complete day's absence. A teacher, for example, might need to have minor dental work, fix broken eyeglasses, meet with a teacher of his/her own child, or any number of other activities that require little time away. When supervisors can approve a brief absence from the building for these events (e.g., during lunch hour or a planning period), teachers are more than willing to forego a full day's absence.

4. In addition to these principal strategies, a number of others should be noted. Some are well known, others are new. They are listed randomly and not according to the frequency of use or reported effectiveness since there are variations in both, depending on local application.

- ✓ Use several approaches so that the plan is a comprehensive one.
- ✓ Establish an employee absence monitoring system.
- ✓ Involve all levels of management in working on the problem.
- ✓ Encourage the development of a school board policy on chronic absenteeism.
- ✓ Develop a district position statement detailing the consequences of repeated absence.
- ✓ Require solid documentation of the reasons for an absence before paid compensation is authorized.
- ✓ Establish special verification requirements for absence at known high incidence times like Monday, Friday, the day before or after a holiday, and the month of May.

- ✓ Give careful attention to prior absence records in employing a new teacher.
- ✓ Use attendance records as one of the factors in "rifing."
- ✓ Use attendance records as a factor in tenure decisions.
- ✓ Set goals for absence reduction.
- ✓ Involve teachers in making plans for reduction of the problem.
- ✓ Include teachers in the process of monitoring absences; i.e., a teacher's committee could determine if an absence should be approved.
- ✓ Educate the leadership of the teacher bargaining unit about the seriousness and the costs of the problem.
- ✓ Provide enough positive feedback so that each teacher knows that his or her contribution is observed and valued.
- ✓ Allow unused sick days to accumulate for cash bonuses at retirement.
- ✓ Improve the physical work environment in any way that affects the problem.
- ✓ Allow unused sick days to accumulate for cash bonsues at retirement.
- ✓ Consciously work at keeping faculty morale high.
- ✓ Develop a team spirit, a sense of belonging to the group within the faculty ranks.

To Illustrate

Elwood Community High School, Elwood, Ind. 46036
Gordon Paquin, Principal

While accumulated sick leave has long been returned to teachers as a bonus at the time of retirement, the contract under which Elwood Community High School operates pays a death benefit that includes accumulated sick days. The provision follows:

ARTICLE VIII

Fringe Benefits

A. A teacher, upon retirement, shall be granted terminal pay at the rate of the per diem contracted salary for that year of service. All retirement is defined as age 65 or 66. If the teacher shall retire between ages of 60 and 65, the percentage of accumulated days shall reduce at the rate of 5 percent per year under age 65. The percentage of accumulated sick leave for terminal pay shall increase 5 percent each year beginning with 75 percent of accumulated sick leave (120 days or less) at age 60.

Percentage of accumulated sick days

65	64	63	62	61	60
100(120)*	95(114)*	90(108)*	85(102)*	80(96)*	75(90)*

*Maximum number of days

Terminal pay shall be paid to beneficiaries or the estate of a teacher who dies prior to retirement. Seventy five percent of a teacher's accumulated sick leave shall be paid to beneficiaries or the estate of a teacher who dies prior to age 60. A teacher retiring prior to age sixty (60) with a minimum of twenty-eight (28) years of teaching experience, twenty (20) years must be in the Elwood Community Schools, shall be paid seventy five percent (75%) of his/her accumulated sick leave. A notice of his resignation effective on the retirement date shall be presented to the Superintendent prior to May 1 of the calendar year preceding the retirement date.

Franklin Community School Corporation, Franklin, Ind. 46131
Charles Pratt, Superintendent

A proposal made repeatedly in the research and literature is to provide good attenders with some tangible reward for their attendance. Another proposal would let the teacher determine the use of money saved from better attendance. The master contract of the Franklin Community district incorporates all of those recommendations in Article VIII:

ARTICLE VIII

Sick Leave and Personal Leave

Section 1. Each teacher shall be entitled to be absent from work on account of illness or quarantine for a total of ten (10) days the first year of employment and eight days in each succeeding year without loss of compensation and accumulative to one hundred thirty-five (135) days. At the conclusion of the school year, an experienced teacher who has used neither sick leave nor personal leave, exclusive of any donation to the sick leave bank, may elect to receive two days' pay instead of permitting the days to accumulate as sick leave. An amount equal to $30.00 times the number of accumulated sick leave days in excess of 135 days will be paid annually to qualified employees following the close of the school year. Up to three (3) days of the annual sick leave allocation may be taken each day for illness in the immediate family.

Stockbridge Public Schools, Stockbridge, Wisc. 53088
Gordon Wagner, Superintendent

Stockbridge is a small rural district that enrolls approximately 200 students. The professional staff consists of 18 teachers and one administrator. It is the kind of district that generally has the least difficulty with teacher absenteeism. Yet even here, a modification in the usual sick leave language of the master contract has in four years already shown some positive results. Two teachers, for example, who had been in the district two years before the language change, had used a total of 46½ days of sick leave at $30.00 a day, for a cost of $1,395. These same teachers used a total of 32 days of sick leave after the language change, costing the district only $960. What is more important is that the students are now receiving instruction more often from their regular teacher.

The new language in the master contract is:

> Severance pay shall be granted to teachers leaving the system at a rate of one-half a day's salary for each day of unused sick leave. Such pay shall also be granted to teachers who have accumulated more than 100 days. This shall be paid at the end of each contract year for the number of days exceeding 100. This shall begin with the 1977-1978 contract year and shall not be retroactive. This should be paid automatically without special application.

Ellington High School, Ellington, Conn. 06029
J. Robert Ford, Principal

The Ellington High School plan has operated so successfully that it has received national publicity. The money usually budgeted to hire substitutes is used to hire three paraprofessionals who join three others already on the staff. These paraprofessionals supervise all non-instructional activities previously assigned to the professional staff. National teacher organizations have long argued for the removal from teachers of these kinds of duties. Teachers should be allowed to do what they have been trained to do -- teach. Giving this position a minor twist, the district has taken teachers out of study hall, in-school suspension room, cafeteria, corridors, lavatories, and bus duty and placed them in instructional settings.

All teachers who had supervision responsibilities like those above have been rescheduled to resource rooms "within their own certification" where students may come for extra assistance.

From the three resource rooms, staff are assigned on a rotating basis to cover classes of absentee teachers. Coverage is defined as taking attendance and maintaining order. No formal teaching is required or expected, but continuity is assured. The teacher covering the class will be there tomorrow; there is improvement in the classroom atmosphere. Substitutes are hired only for long term assignments, defined as five days. The staff have five teaching periods, one planning period, and one resource period.

The program is particularly appropriate in this district because 99 percent of the students ride buses and cannot remain at school after hours. The district reports that the math and business education departments are especially pleased with the arrangement.

Scotch Plains - Fanwood High School, Scotch Plains, N.J. 07076
Terry Riegel, Principal

Staff members at Scotch Plains - Fanwood High School looked at a number of ways to reduce their absences. They selected a positive reinforcement plan for teachers. A cash bonus incentive is payable for good attendance, according to the following schedule:

Sick Days Taken	Annual Bonus
0	$200.00
1	175.00
2	150.00
3	100.00
4	50.00
5 or more	0.00

Houston Independent School District - Houston, Tex. 77027
Miva Baptiste, Executive Director for Staff Development

The Houston Independent School District has developed a plan called "The Second Mile," which has greatly reduced teacher absenteeism during the two years it has been in operation. The basic plan provides stipends for teachers who are willing to "go the Second Mile." There are a number of categories of performance in which a teacher can participate for pay, but attendance is a major one. All teachers who have five or fewer days of absence receive a cash award under this plan.

The Texas state retirement system allows a teacher to select his or her five highest salary years to compute retirement benefits. The attendance stipend is added to the salary for the year in which it is earned, enhancing retirement benefits as well as current income. The district has awarded approximately two million dollars to good attenders. The incentive program has resulted in a 25 percent drop in absences, a significant increase in students' standardized test scores, and a notable positive redirection of district resources.

This *Practitioner* was developed by Peggy Gordon Elliott, Special Assistant to the Chancellor, Indiana University Northwest, Gary.

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